

# Youths in Estonia Defying the Soviet

By ESTHER B. FEIN

Special to The New York Times

TALLINN, Estonia, April 3 — Three young men clustered around a wobbly table in a ramshackle office here in the Estonian capital, filling out questionnaires that could change their lives and threaten their republic's relationship with Moscow.

"Name," began the questions. "Age. Address. Reason for refusing to serve in the Soviet Army."

Young Estonian men are deserting the Soviet Army and refusing to register for the current spring draft in record numbers, defying threats by the Kremlin that they will be arrested.

They come by the dozens every day to the offices of Geneva 49, a part of the growing network of people eager to support and protect the young men.

## Deserters Hunted Down

In the bitter dispute between Moscow and the Baltic republics over their moves toward independence, the fate of young soldiers has so far been the most tragic and human issue.

When the government in Lithuania gave shelter recently to young Lithua-

**'Prison is a better option,' a deserter says of army service.**

nian soldiers who had fled the Soviet Army, Moscow hunted down the deserters and arrested them.

But the young men who come to the Geneva 49 offices here — some with long hair pulled back into ponytails, others with a short-cropped regimental look indicating that they had already begun their service — said they were not deterred or frightened by the threats or by the arrests in Lithuania.

"If they want to, the authorities will put me in jail also and Geneva 49 can't save me," said Avo Tuirsk, a 21-year-old soldier who said he had deserted his unit in East Germany with only one and a half months of service remaining. "But prison is a better option."

The Chief of the General Staff of the

Soviet armed forces, Gen. Mikhail A. Moiseyev, told the Communist Party newspaper Pravda this week that the overall number of young men refusing to sign up for the draft in the Soviet Union had jumped to 6,647 last year from 1,107 in 1988 and 837 in 1985.

"The statistics are very alarming," the general said.

The draft evaders and deserters here say they refuse to serve an army that is illegally occupying their country. They also say they fear abuse in a military that resents the independence drive in their republic.

Geneva 49 and similar groups that are spreading from the Baltic republics to the Ukraine and south to the Transcaucasus republics have been repeatedly attacked by the Soviet authorities, who regard the refusal to sign up and the flight from service as major breaches of discipline that threaten national security and the prestige of the Soviet military.

Geneva 49 was organized last October and is named for the Geneva conventions of 1949. Among their provisions is a guarantee that citizens of an occupied country do not have to serve in the occupier's armed forces. The Soviet Union, which forcibly annexed the three Baltic republics in 1940, signed the accords.

## Beatings of Conscripts Reported

There are about 16,000 Estonians currently serving in the Soviet Army and every year about 8,000 are drafted for two or three years' service. Since Geneva 49 was founded here, about 3,500 young men have registered as rejecting the draft, deserting their units or refusing call-ups for retraining, said Juri Liim, a member of the Estonian Parliament and a founder of the group.

"Last fall alone, five Estonian boys died of beatings in the Soviet Army," Mr. Liim said. "This is a risk we can no longer afford, and the parents of these boys are begging us to help them."

Published reports, court records and stories told by Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian conscripts say Soviet soldiers regularly beat, harass and terrorize young servicemen from the region.

# Military Are Finding Eager Helpers



Estonians are deserting the Soviet Army and refusing to register for the draft. An anti-Soviet poster urges young men not to join the army.

"I was scoffed at and called a fascist from the very beginning," one young Estonian, Rein Antsov, wrote to Geneva 49 of his time in the army.

In his letter, he described repeated beatings, including one in which his commanding officer lured him into a room where three Russian soldiers awaited him. "The light was put out

and they began to beat me with their hands and feet," he wrote. "My hair was torn out and one of my front teeth was broken."

After treatment in a hospital, he said, "I refuse to go back to my company."

"There I shall be killed before I can get to the doctor."

## Provocation Is Charged

In a statement published Sunday in the army newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the Defense Ministry accused Geneva 49 of "provocation and disinformation" by implying that the Geneva conventions prohibited the drafting of Baltic youths. The statement said the accords had "no bearing" on the conscription of Soviet citizens.

The statement said that groups calling for disruption of the draft, particularly in the Baltics, form a "foundation for anxiety and alarm."

General Moiseyev attributed the phenomenon to "the influence of many negative factors, including the strengthening of national manifestations in a number of regions and anti-army campaigns conducted by various informal organizations."

He also complained that conscripts in the Baltics and in other centers of nationalism, like Georgia, were often "provoked" by legislators not to sign up.

Of 259 draft evaders in the three Baltic republics last year, only 2 had been sentenced, General Moiseyev said. In the same period in the Transcaucasian republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, only one out of 1,146 men refusing military service was sentenced.

## 'Distressing' to the Military

Several republics have tried to negotiate with the Kremlin and the Defense Ministry about instituting alternative service that would allow young men to fulfill their civil obligations in nonmilitary ways, or permitting soldiers to serve out their army terms in their native regions.

The Estonian Parliament approved an alternative service law last fall, but

it has yet to put it into effect it and is scheduled to take up the subject again soon.

Soviet authorities have rejected all such suggestions, saying they would compromise the strength and cohesiveness of the military, and they have been similarly opposed to making the Soviet military voluntary and professional.

"The building of empires begins and ends with armies," said a Western diplomat who follows the Soviet military. "In recent years, the Soviet Army has seen a basic defeat in Afghanistan and now an even more significant threat from within, and this is indescribably distressing to the military leadership here. They imagine the world looking at them and laughing that they can't even get a bunch of 18-year-old kids to listen to them."